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IN THE PLENARY SESSION (GENERAL REVIEW)

Eighth Sitting—19th January 1931

DEMAND FOR SPECIFIC AND CONCRETE PROVISIONS FOR SAFEGUARDS OF DEPRESSED CLASSES IN THE FUTURE CONSTITUTION

**Dr. Ambedkar:* Mr. Prime Minister, the Round Table Conference has had to grapple with two most important questions which must arise in any attempt to organise the political life of a community. The problem of responsible government was one of them and the other was that of representative government.

On the question of responsible government in the Provinces I have very little to say. I accept the report of the Committee and subject to my dissents, I stand by it. But regarding the question of responsible government in the Centre I am afraid I take a different view. It would be dishonest to say that the report of the Federal Structure Sub-Committee does not contemplate change in the bureaucratic form of government as we know it today. But it would be equally dishonest for me to conceal from you my opinion that this change is shadowy and not substantial, and the responsibility is bogus and not real.

The Lord Chancellor told us that he had sown the seed and it was for us to tend the plant Sir, we are indeed very grateful to the Lord Chancellor for the great part he has played in this momentous Conference. Grateful as I am to him I am not sanguine that the plant he promises will grow. I fear the grain he has chosen for his seed is sterile and the soil in which he has cast it is not congenial to its growth.

I had submitted to the Lord Chancellor a statement† containing my views on the future constitution for Federal India. I do not know whether or not the Committee on which he presided considered it, for I do not find any reference to it in the report of the Committee on which he presided,

*Proceedings of R.T.C. (1930-31), First Session, pp. 438-41.

†Lord Chancellor was the Chairman of Sub-Committee No. I (Federal Structure) of which Dr. Ambedkar was not a member. It seems, the statement referred to above was not considered.

I adhere to the views I expressed therein, and I cannot give my approval to a constitution which so largely departs from those views. Indeed if I were given a choice between the existing system and the cross-bred by the Committee I would prefer the existing one. But, Sir, if the constitution for the Central Government contained in the Report of the Committee satisfies Sir T. B. Sapru, who has been the friend, guide and philosopher of this Conference, if it is agreeable to Mr. Jayakar, who proclaimed himself the representative of the Youth of India, and if it pleases Sir A. P. Patro, who speaks, as he says, in the name of the Non-Brahmins of India, it is not for me to oppose. My attitude, therefore, is that of one who does not approve but who also does not obstruct. I will leave it to those who bless it to carry it through.

This attitude is all the more agreeable to me because I have no mandate from those whom I represent regarding the form of government. But I have a mandate and that is, while not opposing responsible government, to see that no responsible government was established unless it was at the same time accompanied by a truly representative government. It is when I look at the achievement of the Conference to find out how it has dealt with the question of representative government that I feel most disappointed. The franchise and the representation of the different classes in the Legislatures are the two pillars on which a truly representative government can rest. Everybody knows that the Nehru Committee had adopted adult suffrage and that that part of the constitution framed by it had the support of all political parties in India. When I came to this Conference I had thought that so far as the question of franchise was concerned the battle had already been won. But in the Franchise Committee I was completely disillusioned. I found to my great surprise that all those who had signed the Nehru Report had done so with mental reservations, so much so that it was difficult to persuade even the Indian Liberals to consent to enfranchise 25 per cent of the population for Provincial Legislatures. The franchise for the Central Legislature is no doubt an unknown quantity. But I have no hope that it will be such as to make the Central Legislature more representative of the people than the Provincial Legislatures are going to be. A franchise so limited must necessarily make the future government of India a government of the masses by the classes.

Regarding the question of the distribution of seats among the majority and the various minority communities we all know that there is a deadlock. The deadlock is largely due, in my opinion, to the mischief done in the past. I am sure that if the authorities in India had acted in the past on the principle of justice to all and favour to none, the problem would not have become so difficult of solution. The British Government set different values on different communities according to the political use they made of them and gave to many communities an extraordinary share of political power by denying it to the Depressed Classes in a measure which was their rightful due. In this matter the most aggrieved community is the

Depressed Classes, and I was hoping that this Conference would proceed on the principle that what is wrongly settled is never settled, and give to the Depressed Classes their rightful quota of seats by a revaluation of the old values. But this has not happened. The claims of the other minorities have already been acknowledged and defined. All that they stand in need of is alterations and amendments to bring them in conformity with the enlarged structure and increased scope of the new Government. Whatever be the alterations and amendments, no one will dare to furrow out the foundations that have already been laid down. The case of the Depressed Classes is totally different. Their claims have just been heard. They have not even been adjudged and I do not know how many of them will be admitted. To my mind it is not improbable that having regard to the helplessness of their position, the claims of the Depressed Classes for representations may be whittled down to satisfy the ever-increasing scramble by other communities who are manoeuvring not so much for protection as for power.

In view of this I am bound to make my attitude perfectly plain. As the rights of the Depressed Classes in the future constitution are not defined, any announcement that might be made on behalf of His Majesty's Government regarding the introduction of responsibility in the Centre as well as in the Provinces should make it clear that any advance in that direction must be on condition and subject to an agreement between the communities which would provide effective safeguards for the rights and interests of the Depressed Classes. I must emphasize the gravity of the situation and bring to your notice that no announcement will be acceptable to us unless the position is made perfectly clear in this behalf, and that failing this I and my colleague will be unable to accept the responsibility of participating in the further work of the Conference, and will be compelled to dissociate ourselves from it. Sir, in asking you to do so, I am not asking you to do more than give effect to your pledged word. The British Parliament and those who speak for it, have always stated that they are trustees for the Depressed Classes and I am sure that what they have been saying is not one of those conventional lies of civilization which we are all led to utter to keep human relations as pleasant as possible. In my opinion it is therefore the bounden duty of any Government to see that that trust is not betrayed and let me tell you, Mr. Prime Minister, that the Depressed Classes would regard it as the greatest betrayal on the part of His Majesty's Government if it were to leave us to the mercy of those who have taken no interest in our welfare and whose prosperity and greatness is founded on our ruination and degradation.

For saying so I will be called a communalist by the nationalists and patriots of India. I am not afraid of that. India is a peculiar country and her nationalists and patriots are a peculiar people. A patriot and a nationalist in India is one who sees with open eyes his fellowmen treated as being less than men. But his humanity does not rise in protest. He knows that men and women for no cause are denied their human rights. But it does

not prick his civic sense to helpful action. He finds whole class of people shut out from public employment. But it does not rouse his sense of justice and fair play. Hundreds of evil practices that injure man and society are perceived by him. But they do not sicken him with disgust. The patriot's one cry is power and more power for him and for his class. I am glad I do not belong to that class of patriots. I belong to that class which takes its stand on democracy and which seeks to destroy monopoly in a very shape and form. Our aim is to realise in practice our ideal of one man one value in all walks of life, political, economic and social. It is because representative government is one means to that end that the Depressed Classes attach to it as great a value and it is because of its value to us that I have urged upon you the necessity of making your declaration subject to its fulfilment. You may tell me that the Depressed Classes have your sympathy. My reply is, for a stricken people what is wanted is something more concrete, something more defined. You may despise me for being unduly apprehensive. My reply is it is better to be despised for too anxious apprehensions rather than be ruined by too confident a security.